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JESUS' WORK IN GALILEE: HIS HEALING MINISTRY¹

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It is unlikely that a ministry of healing had any part in the early plans of Jesus. His mission was essentially spiritual. He felt himself called to lead men into a certain quality of life, and believed that such a life would end all human ills. Such was his interpretation of the current hope of the kingdom of God. He had grown up with the hope. The thought of the coming of the kingdom was the very atmosphere of the pious souls of Nazareth. The doing of God's will on earth as it is done in heaven became the passion and prayer of his life. It may have been early that Jesus came to the profound realization that in himself, in his motives, in his attitude toward others, in all his ambitions and endeavors, God's will was actually being done. He must have seen that the hopes of the kingdom could be fulfilled if men would be to God what he was, and would live with one another as he lived. The physical ills that distressed men would largely disappear when human relations were thus rectified, and God's goodness would supply all needs when right spiritual adjustments had been made. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

THE PLACE OF HEALING IN JESUS' MINISTRY

As Jesus entered upon the work of winning men to the quality of life which he had realized, evidently there would be little place in his plan for a ministry of healing. But he found himself at once in the midst of suffering. The kingdom of God as he conceived it was largely for the blessing of the unfortunate. The right relations of man with man meant that the poor would be helped, the oppressed would be free, the sufferers would find kindly ministry. Jesus' heart yearned over the troubled, and he gave to them his words of

¹ This study covers the International Sunday School Lessons for March 6, 13, and 20, 1910.

encouragement and hope. But what could be done for them? Even to superficial observation it is evident that very much suffering is unnecessary. Much of it is caused by wrongdoing and needs quite as much a moral as a physical cure. Much of it is the result of despondency and fear, and vanishes in the presence of a vital, buoyant faith. Jesus, in the splendid vigor of his temperate young manhood, feeling in himself the full tide of a life divine in its perfect purity, found himself face to face with human weakness. The healing ministry was the inevitable result. It was really incidental to his mission, but it grew out of the very spirit of his mission, and grew out of it inevitably.

It was those who were in need who came to Jesus. As he said himself, "they that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick." The troubled, the weary, the heartsick, the sad, the suffering, thronged to the prophet whose words were so strong and brave, whose faith was so bright and conquering, who lived in the presence of the Infinite, and was so sure of God's care for men. Jesus could not turn away from them. He could not be satisfied to tell them that in the kingdom of righteousness their ills would be taken away. An immediate need called for an immediate help. In such a case we would think of money and the institutions of help that money can provide. But Jesus had no money, nor any access to the men of wealth, nor were there any institutions. So he gave himself. Freely, without stint, in gracious sympathy and love, he gave his own wonderful courage, faith, hope, to the sick, the outcast, the poor. How great was the outgo of vitality, the cost of the sympathy, the apostle somewhat realized who saw it and remembered the word of the prophet, "Himself took our infirmities and bare our diseases."

THE HEALING OF THE DEMONIACS

Our scientific interest, however, will not pause on the beautiful picture of strength helping weakness, and faith overcoming fear, but asks insistently the question, "How far did Jesus actually heal the sick?" The most notable cures—those which aroused the greatest interest and produced the deepest impression—were the cures of the demoniacs. And these offer the natural starting-point for such understanding of the healing ministry of Jesus as is possible to us.

There was in the ancient world a widespread belief in the presence and malevolent activity of demons. The earth was supposed to be full of these foul spirits, who, dreading disembodied existence, ever sought residence in such human beings as for any reason became subject to their influence. Probably then, as certainly in later times, it was thought that some wrongdoing rendered one susceptible to the incoming of the demons. It was believed that the demon or demons in a man would harass him with pain and cause serious mental disturbance. When therefore any such symptoms were manifest the demoniacal possession was assumed. A widespread belief of this nature would exercise the strongest kind of suggestion upon weak and unbalanced minds. Let a man become melancholy and nervous, he would begin to fear the demons. Such a fear would increase the abnormal symptoms. The fear would become a terror, and the unhappy wretch would degenerate into a condition of hysteria, idiocy, lunacy. One guilty of a sin that resulted in physical ill might in the same way come to think of himself as abandoned to the demons, and the same course of terror would produce conditions of abnormal consciousness. Such conditions have been observed in China in recent times, and are not entirely wanting even in our own land. In Jesus' day the phenomena were very general, and the explanation of the demoniacal possession was universal. It is manifest that such hallucination could best be treated by a powerful form of suggestion. This has always been the method of the exorcist. That it was used in Palestine is evident from Jesus' question, "If I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?"

There is nothing in the gospels that would lead us to think that Jesus gave any other explanation to these morbid phenomena than that which was current. But his sublime faith in the triumph of the spiritual was sufficient to make him quite sure that no man need be possessed by any evil. His mission was to lead men to be possessed by God. The casting-out of the demons was therefore a simple matter to his great faith. With the spiritual authority that belonged to that faith he commanded the demons to be gone. Under the powerful suggestion of this confident authority the wretched victims of the demoniacal hallucination were restored to sanity.

This produced the most profound impression upon the populace:

"Who is he that commandeth even the unclean spirits, and they obey him?" And there must have been a very large number of cases of healing. Naturally the expectancy would go far toward accomplishing the result. It is altogether probable that Jesus cured all those who came to him afflicted with this morbid malady.

THE WIDESPREAD HEALINGS

Allied in many respects to the psychic and physical conditions produced by the demoniacal hallucination were many forms of abnormality essentially neurotic in their character. We are realizing more and more how large an amount of bodily illness needs courage, faith, and hope rather than drugs. There must have been very many of the sick, to whom the vital personality of Jesus gave the courage necessary to a restoration to health. And how far this method of meeting disease can be effective under favorable conditions, he would be a bold man who would dogmatically declare. We are pleased to make distinction between functional and organic disease, and to admit that psychic cures may avail for the one and to deny their possibility for the other. But, after all, how little is known about the matter, and how constantly strange facts are arising to our astonishment. When recently the little cripple at the Cherry mine flung away his crutches and rushed into the arms of the father, who seemed to have returned from the dead, it was but another example added to the many already known of the extraordinary influence of intense emotion upon the physical organism.

The very large place which the record of the healings occupies in the gospels would indicate that they must have been very unusual in number and in character.

THE CONDITIONS FOR EXTENSIVE HEALING

It is probable that there have never been conditions so favorable for an extensive manifestation of psychotherapy as those created by the presence of Jesus in the environment in which he lived. There was the very large number of the demonized, regarded as the most hopelessly afflicted folk, whom he invariably healed. This extensive success would afford the basis for confirming the faith of Jesus in the power that he possessed, and for exciting the faith of the people.

There was thus produced an extraordinary expectancy of healing in the highest degree favorable to secure the results expected. A centurion, kindly, though a heathen, went to seek the Lord's help for his palsied servant. The servant was under the influence of the expectancy created by this undertaking. The record states that the healing was actually effected without even the presence of Jesus.

The pre-eminent factor in producing these results was of course the commanding personality of Jesus. There have been other healers, sometimes wonder-workers, sometimes seekers of notoriety, sometimes fanatics, sometimes mercenary charlatans. There have been other healers of pure and simple faith. But in no other as in Jesus was there such hope and love and invincible faith in God and in man; in no other as in Jesus was there such glorious confidence in the regnancy of the spirit combined with practical common-sense; in no other as in him was there such combination of strength and sympathy—perfect physical health and the intensest susceptibility to others' pain. The more one thinks of Jesus, the more one tries to imagine what his presence would mean to a discouraged soul and an enfeebled body, the less perhaps is one inclined to set limits to the healing power that he must have exercised upon the simple folk of Galilee.

THE EXTRAORDINARY DEMAND FOR HEALING

Naturally to the people the cures became the most significant element in Jesus' ministry. He spoke wonderful words, to be sure, but he cast out demons. Nothing so lies upon us like a pall as sickness. What can we do when our hearts are wrung with pain for those we love? Men will cross the world to consult a famed physican in the hope of healing. Ancient story is full of the search of the afflicted for a cure. Through the length and breadth of the land, therefore, it must have gone that the prophet of Nazareth was healing, and wherever Jesus went he was besieged. It is clear that the demand embarrassed him. He had no wish to offer signs of messiahship, or to secure allegiance through the bestowal of physical benefits. He knew that a spiritual faith is never so produced. It was his pity and love that led him to use the wonderful power which he found himself to possess, but he ever bade those who were healed to be

silent. Of course this was impossible, and the fame of the cures went through the land.

THE HEALING OF NATURE

But the record of the miracles of Jesus goes beyond anything for which a scientific explanation is possible. It is important to remember that our records come from an uncritical age. There was no scientific observer to report for us the events exactly as they occurred. There was a natural expectancy of miracle in connection with any extraordinary personality. And they did not think of miracle as our theological definitions have often expressed it. They did not mean a contravention of the laws of nature, or a manifestation of some higher and unknown law of nature, for they had no notion of natural law as we think of it at all. Miracle, as the name implies, was a marvel. So we regard many modern discoveries as marvelous, but the word "miracle" has become a theological term and we do not seriously use it in common speech. To the ancients, however, miracle, conceived as a highly extraordinary occurrence, was to be expected whenever conditions were sufficient to warrant it. The Messiah would of course work miracles. Jesus healed the demonized; why should he not heal nature? The distinction we should make would not have occurred to them. So we have the beautiful story of the stilling of the tempest. If demons could disturb the human consciousness, perhaps they could blow the waters of the lake into billows. And the authoritative voice that could say to the legion of demons, "Begone," could say to the winds, "Be still." Probably some actual occurrence produced the narrative. Perhaps in some storm the strong courage and faith of Jesus calmed the fearful fishermen, and the waves, heightened by their terror, were less dangerous as they regained their poise. And so the story grew that he had stilled the tempest. And the beautiful symbolic significance (perhaps, after all, the chief value of any miracle story) may have helped to give form to the record. Wherever Jesus went he must have carried courage and calm. If adverse conditions were not removed, the spirits of the dejected men who had to meet them were so lifted, that even natural difficulties seemed to vanish. And as they told the story of the life that he had lived among them they could remember nothing for which his presence had not sufficed.

THE TRADITION OF THE CURES

In some such way as above suggested the tradition of the cures must have arisen and been passed on. The disciples saw with different eyes from ours. Doubtless events which they have chronicled in all faithfulness we should describe differently if we saw the same events today. The gospels were written a generation after the time of Jesus, and the evangelists were not scientific experts. The great value of the narratives is the revelation they give to us of the impression that Jesus made upon those who knew him. One way in which they interpret the life so strikingly summed up in the vigorous word of Peter—"He went about doing good"—is in the beautiful stories of that good that he did. Many of them we can understand, and they interpret for us the spiritual power of Jesus. Many of the stories we frankly do not understand. Did Jesus heal a leper? We have seen strange things of late years, and it is bold to speak of the impossible, but certainly it is quite beyond any modern understanding. Some cases of healing, like the miracles on nature, belong to the heightening of the tradition, and reflect rather the impression produced by Jesus than the actual historical occurrences. Where the line is to be drawn each student will reverently determine for himself. At that point the criteria are likely to be largely subjective.

JESUS' ESTIMATE OF HIS CURES

We are on the safest ground when we accept Jesus' own estimate of his cures. In a very interesting passage (Luke 10:17-20) it is related that the disciples reported their own success in overcoming the demons. Jesus hailed it as a sign of the destruction of Satan and of the triumph of spiritual power over all evil. But he added the caution, "Nevertheless in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." So he ever minimized miracle and healing. They were evidences of spiritual power. They reveal to us the effect of Jesus' person. They enable us to see his sympathy with all human weakness. They show us the goodness of God, through faith in whom healings were wrought then and may be wrought today. But beyond all lesser good that faith may bring is the companionship with God that Jesus made supreme. And the greatest of all miracles is Jesus himself.